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AN AMERICAN HEALTH DILEMMA

A MEDICAL HISTORY OF
AFRICAN AMERICANS AND
THE PROBLEM OF RACE

BEGINNINGS TO 1900

W. MICHAEL BYRD AND LINDA A. CLAYTON

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More advance praise for *An American Health Dilemma*

At last! The authors must be congratulated for having produced the first comprehensive, well-researched project that gives timely insights and understanding into racism as a major root cause for the ethnic health disparities that have plagued African Americans for the past several centuries.

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President, National Medical Association

An American Health Dilemma is a must read for every medical student, every medical historian, and every physician who cares about understanding the complexity of medicine.

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President, Summit Health Coalition
Past President, National Medical Association

Drs. Byrd and Clayton have made a major contribution to our understanding of the historical impact of race on health care in America. From slavery days to the modern age, the foundation for and consequences of unequal medical treatment are explored.

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Fresh insights abound and relationships hitherto ignored are shown to have great significance. The book is filled with new ideas.... While students of race and medicine may be especially grateful for this work, all of us will come away with a clearer view of the human condition and a rare insight into how we got to be the way we are.

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REVEREND EDWARD B.BLACKMAN
Civil Rights and Community Activist

X An American Health Dilemma

VOLUME ONE

**A Medical History of
African Americans and the
Problem of Race:
Beginnings to 1900**

W. Michael Byrd, MD, MPH
Linda A. Clayton, MD, MPH

With a Foreword by Dr. Robert J. Blendon

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*To Sybil, Alice, Lois,
and our fathers*

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Foreword

This book represents an extraordinary achievement by the authors, who have brought together in two volumes the history of the African American health experience in the United States and its broader historical perspective.

In particular, *An American Health Dilemma: A Medical History of African Americans and the Problem of Race* documents in the most detailed manner how, from the nation's earliest period, the African American population suffered severely from years of slavery, racial discrimination, segregation of health care facilities, denial of health professional education opportunities and gross underfunding of those opportunities that existed, and neglect of the most elementary health needs of their community. It traces, through successive generations, the major barriers that prevented African Americans from receiving the most basic medical care and public health services, and examines the resulting high rates of death, disability, and human suffering.

Of additional importance, this book is the first to chronicle in such detail the courage, leadership, ingenuity, and scientific and professional skills of generations of individual African American physicians and other health professionals who struggled against great odds to build a responsive health system that would meet the needs of those living in a segregated society, often in great poverty.¹ It also highlights many of the important and heretofore unrecognized contributions made by a diverse group of African American pioneers to the broader world of medical treatment and biomedical science.

This series is of such significance because it seeks to explain and document the historical factors behind today's huge disparities in the level of health between Whites and African Americans.² The fact that African Americans today live substantially shorter lives than Whites; die more frequently from cancer, heart disease, stroke, and diabetes; and see their infants die at nearly twice the rate of Whites is in part a result of their unique and tragic historical experience in America. Growing from this, African Americans today also remain less likely than Whites to have health insurance coverage and less likely to be treated by a physician when they are ill.

The need for this book grows from the understanding that these health disparities and their historical antecedents are not well recognized by the majority of Americans, particularly White Americans. In fact, beliefs today are almost the opposite of the reality portrayed in this work. Surveys show that the majority of White Americans believe that discrimination, past and present, is not a major reason for the social and economic problems African Americans face today.³ They also show that most Whites are not aware that African Americans have a shorter life expectancy, a higher rate of infant mortality, more problems with access to health care, and a higher rate of being uninsured than Whites.⁴ It is my hope that these two volumes will become textbooks in classrooms across the country and will help bridge this wide gap in knowledge of the extent of African American health problems and their roots.⁵ These volumes should also serve as important texts for minority students seeking greater understanding of the many contributions made by leaders of the African American medical community across many centuries. If not for the publication of these volumes, many of those extraordinary health care achievements would have remained unknown even to those most concerned with these issues.

The bringing together of this huge body of work about the history of the African American health care experience in the United States required years of dedicated research under difficult circumstances. We are all indebted to W.Michael Byrd, MD, and Linda A.Clayton, MD, for their devoted commitment to bringing this history to the broader health and medical community. I hope their effort will result in a movement in this nation to provide the African American population with a more responsive and caring health system in the new century.

I am very pleased and privileged that this important work was conducted under the auspices of the Department of Health Policy and Management and the Division of Public Health Practice of the Harvard School of Public Health.

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